

Benchmark Committee

Meeting Summary

December 17, 1999

(Adopted 1/12/00)

Committee members present: Greg Devereux, John Kelly, John Rindlaub, Charlie Shell (representing Councilmember Richard McIver)

Committee members not present: Chair Bob Helsell, Commissioner Judie Stanton

The Benchmark Committee convened at 9:00 am at the SeaTac Marriott Hotel. In the Chair's absence, Acting Chair John Rindlaub called the meeting to order. The meeting summary of November 29, 1999 was adopted. No members of the public wished to offer comments.

Presentation of Staff Recommended Benchmark Formats

Kathy Elias, Committee staff person, introduced two formats based on the discussion at last month's meeting. The first format is for a set of indicators that characterize what is happening with the transportation system; the second format is a set of benchmarks and targets that are the actual measures of investment in the system. Three indicators were proposed: system usage, system safety and environmental impact. Four benchmarks and targets were proposed: three for physical condition (interstate highways, major arterials and bridges) and one for congestion.

Physical Condition. Following comments were made to clarify the roadway condition benchmarks: the targets of 0% poor by 2020 for roadway condition are based on the principle of lowest life cycle cost and managing to a standard by which no road is allowed to deteriorate below a rating of fair. It was noted that "major arterials" is a functional classification and should be changed to "major state routes" with an asterisk denoting that Highways 395, 2, 12 and 101 are included. The change from use of pavement structural condition to the roughness index causes a data blip, so to avoid confusion, show only data from 1993 forward.

On the bridge condition benchmark, "deficient" is used to include both "structurally deficient" and "functionally obsolete" and it may not always be a good investment to upgrade little used bridges. Therefore the target is not proposed to be 0% deficient, but no more than 10% deficient. It was suggested that staff research whether this target is a realistic one.

It was noted that there is no current data compiled on the condition of local arterials but that such data would be available by 2001. It was agreed to insert a placeholder indicating the intent to include a benchmark when the data are available.

Congestion. The proposed benchmark on interstate highway congestion is based on the percent of road miles congested. It was noted that the change over time in Washington is what we have control over; the national mean may be changing for a variety of reasons. Another available measure is the Texas Transportation Institute's data on annual delay per driver. This is available for the Seattle metro area as well as other state and national urban areas. Staff were asked to bring back a benchmark showing these data for Washington's cities compared to the national average. A member cautioned against the belief that it is possible to buy your way out of congestion with investments in capacity. It was also suggested that perhaps the 2020 target could be indicated on the graph after a jagged line to show that it is a future point in time.

Available State and National Data for Benchmarking

Pedestrian and bicycle accidents. Pedestrian and bicycle safety, which is very important to local communities, shows the same trends as auto safety. Fatalities have been declining over time and Washington's rate is better than the national average. Members decided the new data did not add to what was already available.

Seismic safety of bridges. Data are being assembled and were not available for today's meeting.

Freight mobility and trade competitiveness. Available data from the Pacific Maritime Association indicate that the market share for the Ports of Seattle and Tacoma is declining compared to other West Coast ports. Kathy indicated that she was working with port stakeholders to obtain data on numbers of trucks and rail cars using Washington's transportation system, based on port cargo volumes. That was the only other potential measure identified that is based on existing data. It could serve as a proxy for system congestion. Experts throughout the freight industry have stated that any data on shipping times or costs are proprietary to private industry and are not available at aggregated levels. It was agreed to put the task of identifying a meaningful measure back on the industry's stakeholders.

Mobility options. Data were presented that showed transit ridership per capita for the five large urbanized transit districts in the state. The trend shows slightly rising ridership in all urban areas since the mid-1990s, a positive sign of increasing use of transit. Members discussed the usefulness of the data and asked what guidance it provided on where investments should be made. It was noted that the data do not help get at the problem of congestion. Members asked whether any comparative data from other parts of the country were available. It was also suggested that this should be referred to the Investment Strategies Committee.

Efficiency. Three topic areas were discussed: transit costs per hour; highway expenditures per mile; and administrative costs.

- **Transit costs.** Data on vehicle operating costs per hour were presented for the five large urban transit districts in the state. It was noted that the figures were not adjusted for inflation. Members asked whether comparative data were available for other parts of the country. Staff were asked to look at cost per rider as perhaps a more relevant measure.
- **Highway expenditures.** Tables were presented that showed maintenance and construction spending per system mile, based on Professor David Hartgen's analysis of data reported to the Highway Performance Monitoring System (HPMS). Charlie Howard of WSDOT provided a brief explanation of the figures. He said they represent the agency's total spending divided by the total number of miles in the system, thus an indicator of the size of an agency's program, not its efficiency. If a state is spending more per mile, it simply means that the Legislature is investing more money in roads. Charlie suggested that more relevant measures would be cost per lane mile paved or cost per interchange built.
- **Administrative costs.** For federal reporting purposes, Charlie went on, expenditures are divided into construction, maintenance & operations, and other. Thus, "administrative" costs is a catchall category for everything that does not fit into the first two categories. A significant portion of these other costs are transfers to other agencies. No information is available on how other states categorize their costs. According to Professor Hartgen's comparisons, Washington looks like its administrative costs are higher than the national mean. When WSDOT analyzes administrative costs such as accounting, computers, and personnel, its figure shows support costs at about 7.5% of total spending, or slightly less than the national mean. While the Washington Roundtable recommended that administrative costs be no more than 10% of total spending, WSDOT may already be below that.

A member asked whether the ratio could be flipped to answer the question, "What proportion of total costs are spent delivering the product?" The message on talk radio has been that enough money is coming in but results are not coming out the other end. It was noted that the Commission needs to get at the public perception that there is plenty of money in the system and that it is not being spent efficiently.

An additional set of data was presented that showed WSDOT, county and city spending on construction, maintenance and administration. The data show that for each level of government, administrative costs have grown almost three times as fast as inflation, while construction and maintenance have grown more slowly. Chris Mudgett of the County Road Administration Board (CRAB) briefly discussed how the data are collected. Cities and counties are required to report annually how funds are spent, based on BARS accounting codes. The reporting form does not distinguish between true administrative costs and operational costs such as planning or engineering for projects that do not actually get built. There are also problems with lack of consistency in

coding and reporting across jurisdictions. Members concluded that despite the various data problems, the Commission could not rationalize its way out of the problem of public perception.

The Committee adjourned at 12:00 pm.